

Charlie Lynn and the Kokoda Track, as painted by Allan Waite



The KING of KOKODA

By Mike Butler

Almost a lifetime ago, a poorly-trained, hopelessly-outclassed band of 400 Australians was ordered to hold back 2500 Japanese troops – at all costs – near Isurava village deep in Oro Province. The Japanese orders were to annihilate them, and for four days and nights of fighting they almost did, in combat so savage that killing often came down to rifle butts and manual strangulation.

“Isurava was our Alamo, nothing else stood in the way between here and Australia,” revealed my mullet-haired guide after pointing out a set of leg bones that were still in the muddy boots its anonymous owner was wearing when he died.

It's as chilling as it is peaceful, looking out across a stunning V-necked cleft in the Owen Stanley Range as I try to comprehend the savagery that once took place beneath

my feet. I'm standing on sacred ground; sacred Australian ground. Welcome to day two on the Kokoda Track. While Gallipoli has firmly captured the imagination of Australians as a national pilgrimage destination, this 160km PNG track through some of the most hellish, yet beautiful, terrain on earth is begging to be discovered...

I wrote those words in 2001 for *Men's Health* magazine when, according to official figures, only 76 overseas visitors had walked it that year – and sure enough it has now been discovered. Those numbers have now swelled to more than 3000 a year, making it the country's biggest drawcard as well as the most emotionally-significant connection

between Australia and PNG. In Australia, Kokoda has become embedded in the national psyche and it's thanks to one man in particular, Charlie Lynn.

I never did the track again. Once is enough as far as I'm concerned, but Charlie has gone back again and again – 75 times so far – as well as becoming an advocate for the Koiari and Orokaiva people who live along it, defending the memory of the hell that happened in 1942. More than anybody, he's been responsible for Australia 'discovering' Kokoda, and in late March this year he was nationally recognised for his work on the track.

The timing couldn't be better. A month before Australia commemorates the

“...Without Charlie Lynn's dedication to the people of the Kokoda Track, and Papua New Guinea in general... there would be no special purposes authority – it would still be sitting in limbo...”

Sir Peter Barter
Former PNG Minister for
Intergovernment Relations

100th anniversary of the beach landings at Gallipoli on April 25 (Anzac Day), this white-haired fellow who looks like Kentucky Fried Chicken's Colonel Sanders but sounds as Australian as they come, was conferred with PNG's highest official honour, the Order of Logohu, by Governor-General Sir Michael Ogio. And with that he has earned the title of a chief of the nation.

Why is the timing so good? Because, “if Gallipoli was Australia's baptism, Kokoda was its confirmation”, says Lynn. “Those qualities of mateship, sacrifice, endurance and courage forged on the beaches of Gallipoli were what was put to the test in

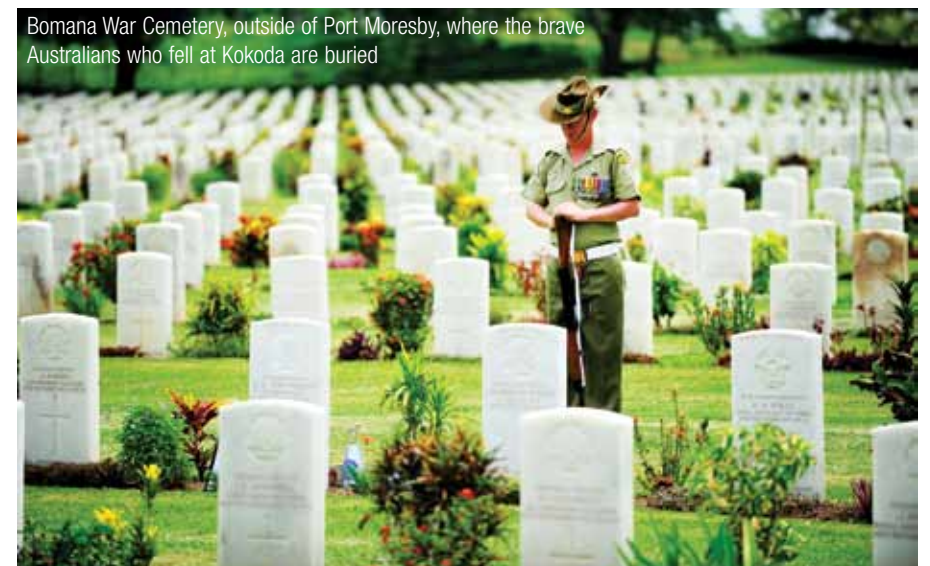


Vietnam vet
Charlie Lynn

Raising the Australian flag in PNG on Kokoda Day, November 3 – which was initiated by Charlie Lynn

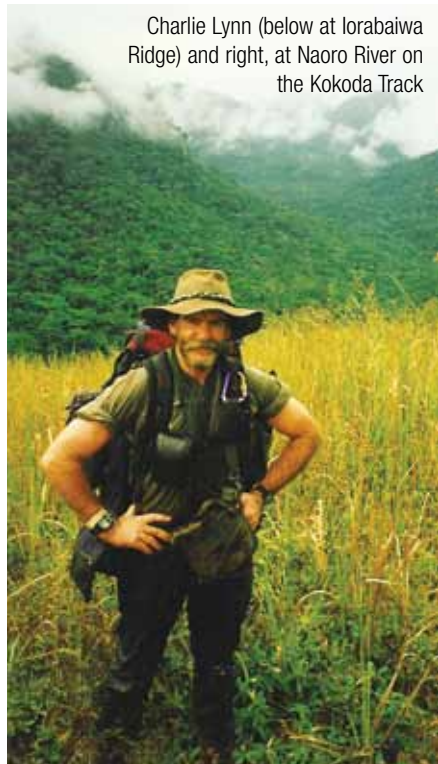


Bomana War Cemetery, outside of Port Moresby, where the brave Australians who fell at Kokoda are buried





The writer Mike Butler on his Kokoda trek in 2001



Charlie Lynn (below at Iorabaiwa Ridge) and right, at Naoro River on the Kokoda Track

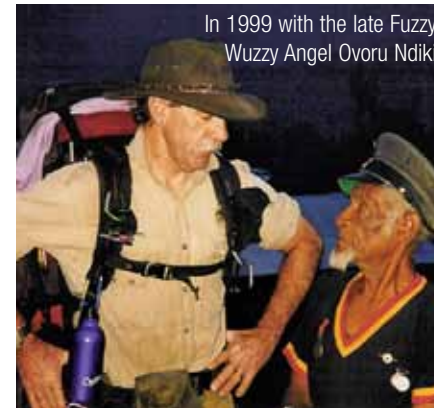
1942. It's what saved Australia." Because sure as hell Mother England didn't. Says Lynn: "Our faith in 'great and powerful friends' coming to our aid in the event of Japan entering the war was shattered with the sinking of HMAS *Prince of Wales* and HMAS *Repulse* near



Singapore on December 10, 1941, three days after the Japanese had knocked the snot out of the US Navy at Pearl Harbour." Singapore was taken outright in February, and in May, General Douglas MacArthur abandoned the American-controlled

"...After being to America and seeing how its battle sites were revered and cared for, there was absolutely nothing here... not a memorial, not a signpost, nothing..."

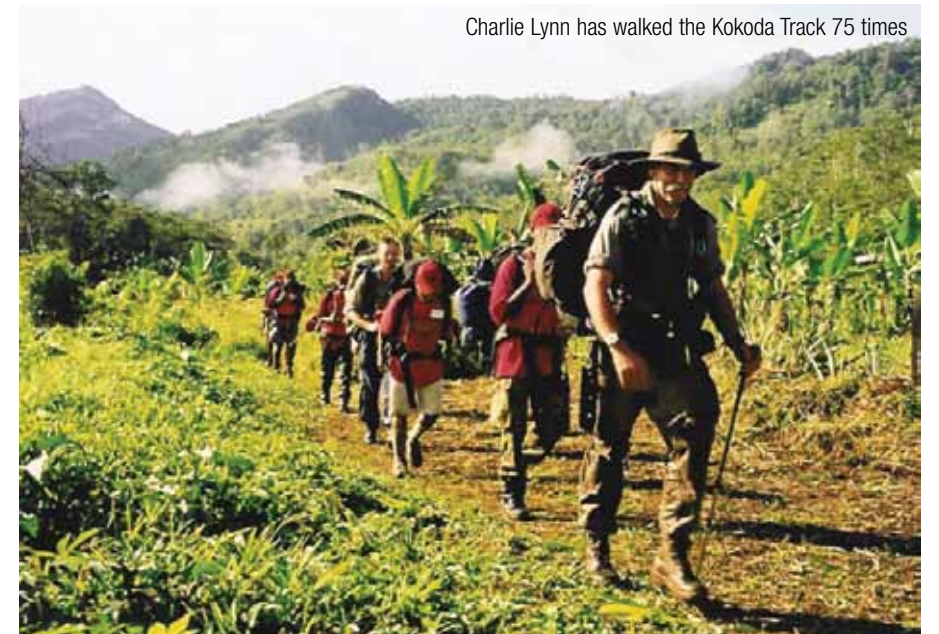
Philippines to the advancing and ruthless Japanese who, by that time, had taken over Rabaul. It wasn't a question of "if" but "when" the Japanese would hit the main island en route to Australia. The day they did, Remembrance Day, July 23, 1942, a barely-trained home guard of militia forces and a small band of New Guinea Rifles were the only thing that stood between thousands of battle-hardened Japanese marines and



In 1999 with the late Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel Ovoru Ndiki

Port Moresby. The campaign centred on the 1m-wide 160km-long Kokoda Track through the Owen Stanley Range, crossing gorges and streams, and over ridges up to 2500m high, from Buna to Port Moresby.

It was known as the worst battlefield of WWII. Outnumbered five to one, fighting against superior armed and experienced jungle troops, the Australians finally sapped the strength of the Japanese, bringing their advance to a halt, and then drove them out of New Guinea. "What happened in those months was without doubt both Australia's and Papua New Guinea's greatest hour," says Lynn



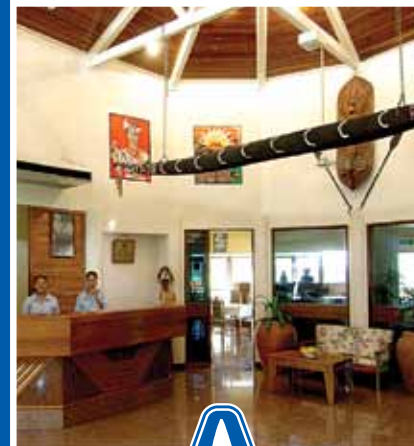
Charlie Lynn has walked the Kokoda Track 75 times

who couldn't believe what he saw when he first came there in 1991. Off the back of directing the world famous Sydney-to-Melbourne ultramarathon a few years earlier, Lynn tried to organise an endurance race over the track for the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign. It was an abject failure. "I couldn't even get

a single sponsor. People simply weren't interested." But he did walk the track and what he saw became a pivotal moment in the recently-retired Army major's life. "After being to America and seeing how its battle sites were revered and cared for, there was absolutely nothing here. The battle sites whose stories I'd grown up with – places like Isurava, Templeton's

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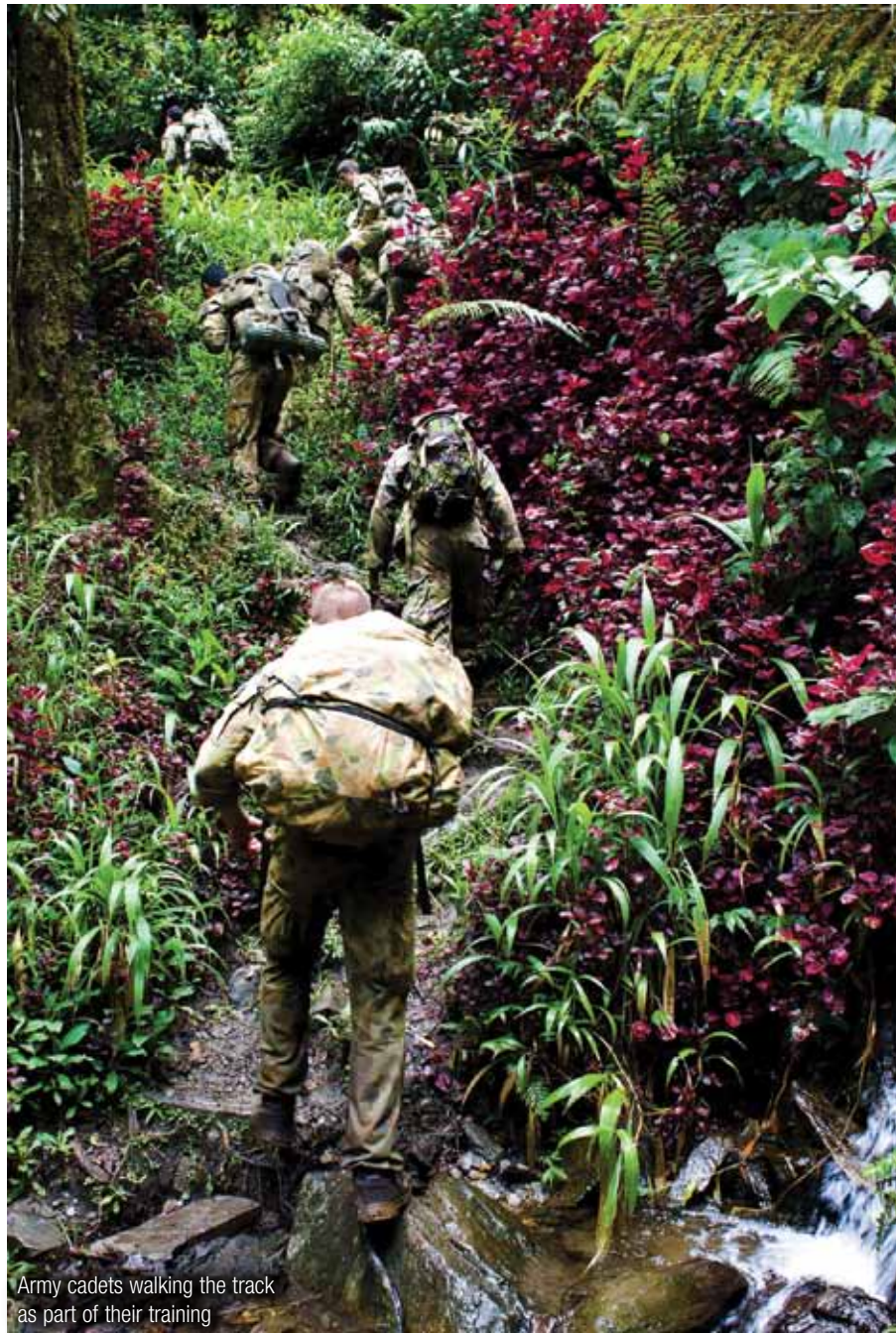
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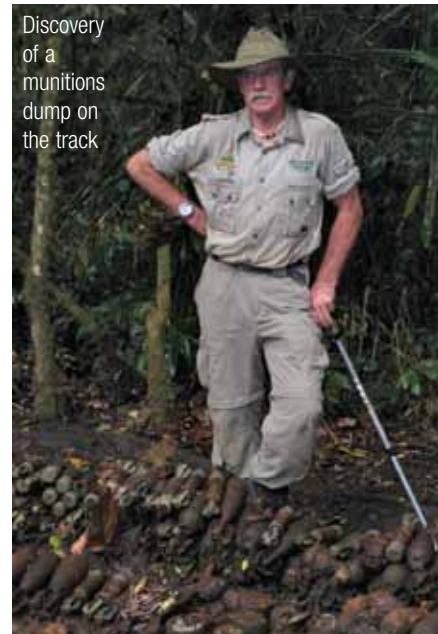


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Army cadets walking the track as part of their training



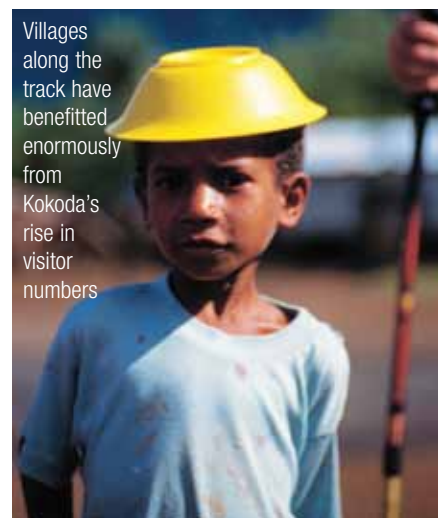
Discovery of a munitions dump on the track

"...If Gallipoli was Australia's baptism, Kokoda was its confirmation..."

Crossing and Brigade Hill – were completely overgrown, not a memorial, not a signpost, nothing." So Lynn decided to do something about it. With wife Jill he formed Adventure Kokoda, to bring alive its memory by leading expeditions of Australians along the track.. It was the first of around 30 trekking companies that now operate



New South Wales MP Charlie Lynn focused on veteran affairs and his Kokoda experience in his parliamentary valedictory speech



Villages along the track have benefitted enormously from Kokoda's rise in visitor numbers



Lynn with a local friend

on the track, and it remains the most credible. Becoming an officer of the order is a "great honour, not only for me but the villages on the track – but more importantly it's a gateway to a greater and more meaningful commitment to Papua New Guinea", says Lynn who,



Crossing swollen rivers is a Kokoda norm

despite being a New South Wales parliamentarian for 10 years, is scathing of Australia's continuing colonial and patronising attitude towards its northern neighbour. In particular, Lynn is indebted to the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels. I met one when I did the track in 2001. Ovuru Ndiki

was his name and I kid you not, it felt like I was meeting Gandhi. He was a wizened old man when I saw him but just a teenager when the war came to his doorstep. "Without a doubt we wouldn't have won if it weren't for people like him," says Lynn. "Resources were so scarce in





"Chief" Charlie receives a carved gift along the track

New Guinea that villagers were forcibly recruited to support the war effort. Many had no idea of it and were conscripted against their will. They were told men from Japan were the enemy. "For many of these men, other villagers living in remote tribal lands were also considered 'enemy'. You can only imagine the fear they felt as they were forcibly marched away from their families on to enemy soil."

became known as 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' because of their selflessness in helping wounded and sick Diggers during the various campaigns. "They carried vital war supplies on their bare shoulders in endless lines over hostile and inhospitable terrain. Unsurprisingly, modern day trekkers are in awe of their efforts." Lynn's work on the track has been at his own sacrifice. In fact, it almost sent him blind. In 2010, he was leading his 59th



Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels at Menari village, 1996



During his Army years

trek when his eyes were attacked by an acanthamoeba parasite, which destroys the corneas by eating them out. "By the time I was able to get helicoptered out of the jungle, I'd lost my sight," Lynn says. "Initially, they didn't think they could save my sight at all. I was in the eye hospital for five weeks." Lynn now has corneal scarring and has to wear a cap in the sun to shade his eyes, but his vision "slowly came back", he says, "in the left eye first. The improvement's been very gradual, but I can now read. I couldn't read for about three months and that was hard." Six months after he was hospitalised, he hiked the track again and despite now being 70-years-old, his commitment to



Log crossing on the Kokoda Track

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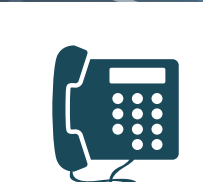
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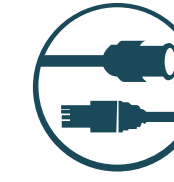
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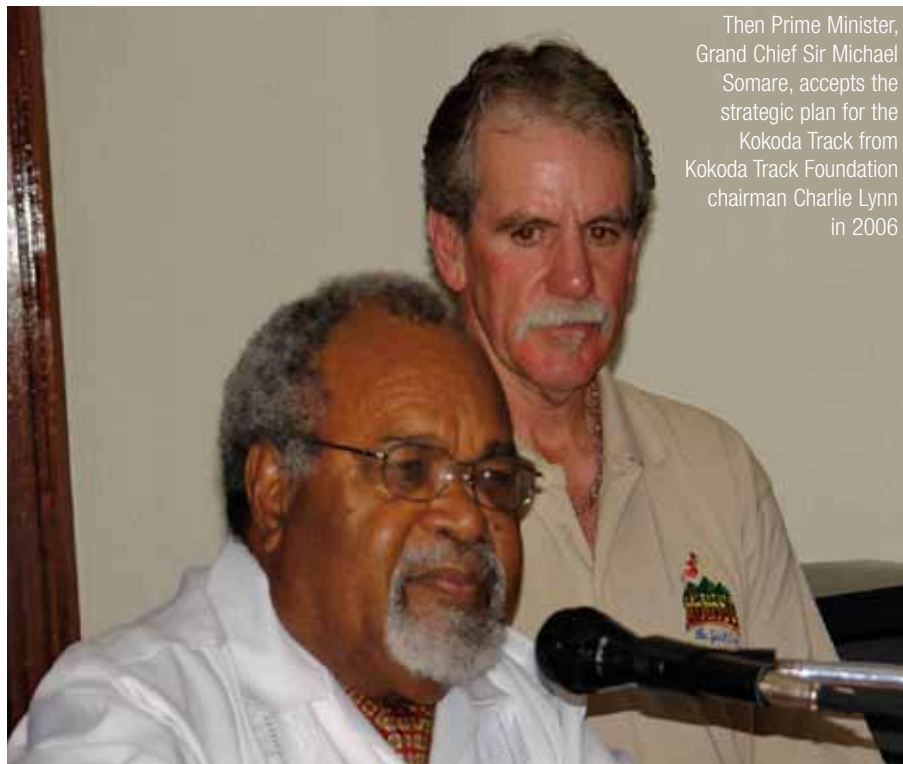


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Then Prime Minister, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare, accepts the strategic plan for the Kokoda Track from Kokoda Track Foundation chairman Charlie Lynn in 2006

Kokoda is still unwavering. Earlier this year he did it again, this time with his grandson Tom. “It was a wonderful opportunity for his grandad,” he says. “I was proud of the way Tom handled it. (By doing the track) you get to walk in the footsteps of veterans and it helps you advance your maturity by many years.”

You would have to look long and hard to find a person who better serves PNG, or Australia for that matter, and there are few who would be able to match the personal effect this man has had on the lives of so many. He is not only extremely personable and self-effacing when you meet him, but is a real inspiration for those who have had that privilege.



With his wife Jill at Government House, Port Moresby, in March after receiving the Order of Logohu for his services to PNG



Charlie was proud of the way his grandson Tom (pictured) “handled” the experience of the track earlier this year

I know, because I am one of them. That ‘mullet-haired’ guide who took me on the track in 2001 was Charlie Lynn, and he remains one of the greatest men I’ve ever met. Papua New Guinea has got itself a new great chief and thanks to him, arguably the best – certainly the most interactive – war pilgrimage destination in the world. 📌

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LYNN’S LEGACY Some of Charlie Lynn’s achievements through Adventure Kokoda:

- Developed the first strategic plan for the Kokoda Track and presented it to then Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare.
- Initiated a proposal to proclaim and develop the Kokoda Track as a national memorial park with the aim of creating a self-sustaining eco-adventure trekking industry for the Koiari and Orokaiva people who live along it.
- In 1996 rediscovered the original Isurava battle site.
- Organised the first topographical map of the area since WWII, which is now used by almost all trekkers.
- Set up the Network Kokoda Foundation, which funds educational scholarships and health services in PNG.
- Set up the Kokoda Bursary Program, which sponsors student education at the Port Moresby Grammar School.
- Initiated the ‘Bring-a-Buk’ program, which has placed more than 2000 new books into the Port Moresby Grammar School library.
- Initiated the ‘Yumi Helpim Pikinini’ program, which delivers school supplies to village schools along the Kokoda Track.
- Personally led almost 5000 people across the track.
- Led the campaign for Australian recognition of the Fuzzy Wuzzys Angels.
- Initiated Kokoda Day, November 3.

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